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# BEGAMS OF BENGAL

*Mainly Based on State Records*

By

BRAJENDRA NATH BANERJEE

With a Foreword by

SIR JADUNATH SARKAR, KT., C.I.E., D.LITT.

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To

MY FRIEND AND COLLEAGUE

**Sj. Jogesh Chandra Bagal**



## FOREWORD

(SIR JADUNATH SARKAR, KT., C.I.E., D.LITT.)

The Begams of Bengal ! The very name may raise in the European reader's mind a picture of "the gorgeous East showering barbaric pearl and gold." The picture would be one of untold wealth and unimaginable luxury—and their natural adjunct, Oriental vice. But the patient reader will find in this book intense human interest, and the interest is tinged with tragedy of the deepest dye. An aged queen-consort down on her knees before the foreign desolator of her country to secure peace for her noble husband, who had been reduced to utter helplessness is battling long and strenuously for national defence. A queen-mother writhing in the dust of the public streets of Murshidabad, like the meanest beggar woman, at the sight of the mangled remains of her son,—one day the lord of the two kingdoms of Bengal and Bihar. Daughters and consorts of former ruling princes, drowned like blind puppies at the stern bidding of their relentless conqueror, who was also their kin in blood. A widowed queen, reduced to a starving allowance, but still strewing flowers and lighting lamps every night on her murdered husband's grave. Nor are wanting in this company of heroines—where "Beauty and Anguish walk arm in arm"—some daughters of Eve, whose lives of luxury and vice rivalled the orgies of the baser Cæsars of Rome. Can the wildest fiction imagine scenes stranger than these of true history ? And that history relates to our own land of Bengal and to the very last age of its independent political life.



As we close this volume, the words of the poet keep ringing in our hearts,—

“The boast of Heraldry, the pomp of Power,  
And all that Beauty, all that Wealth e’er gave,  
Awaits alike the inevitable hour;  
The paths of Glory lead but to the grave.”

This history of our own country and people has been here narrated by Brajendra Nath Banerjee with the strictest regard for truth and long tireless labour in seeking out historical records. How long and fruitful his labour has been, I know best, as I assisted at the birth of this book. When the first draft of *The Begams of Bengal* was shown to me by the then very young author,—now thirty years ago, I found it full of the emotional gush and shallow rhetoric, which was the characteristic pitfall of young Bengali writers then. But the author though young, was not vain; he was eager to learn the technique of true historiography under proper guidance. He scrapped up his work and set to gathering materials at the true fountain-head of history,—namely the Persian chronicles and the English Factory records of the time,—correcting, supplementing and rewriting more than once his second version! The result is the present volume, which will hold its place as the standard history of these royal personages and a vivid picture of Court life in that age,—so long as hitherto unknown materials are not discovered,—and of such a discovery there is no prospect.

## PREFACE

The history of the royal house of Murshidabad during the 18th century is, in one way, the history of Bengal, and this fact is the sole justification of the title of the book which deals with the lives of some of the celebrated ladies who adorned the homes of the ruling Nawabs of Murshidabad. The Begams of their powerless successors do not excite the historian's curiosity.

Some of the ladies described in this book exerted a salutary influence upon the Nawabs and their administration. But others were not a credit to the sex, nor was their influence over the rulers beneficial; on the other hand, their life-sketch brings out in full relief the cause of the decline of the independent Muslim Kingdom of Bengal and the defeat of the master of millions by a handful of Europeans at Plassey. Ahmadnagar and Golkunda, like Bengal, furnish instances of petticoat government leading to the downfall of those once mighty kingdoms. Their Sultans became pleasure-seekers and mere tools in the hands of their Begams, who virtually ruled the destiny of the people from behind the *pardah*. Hence, the lives of the Nawab Begams of Bengal will, it is hoped, be found not without interest and instruction to the student of Bengal's history.

76, Indra Biswas Road  
Belgachia  
Calcutta, 12th October, 1942

BRAJENDRA NATH BANERJEE



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# BEGAMS OF BENGAL

## ZINAT-UN-NISA

(*Daughter of Nawab Murshid Quli Khan*)

**M**MURSHID QULI—better known to history as Nawab Jafar Khan—was a Brahman converted to Muhammadanism. In 1701, the Emperor Aurangzib raised him to the post of Diwan (or financial minister) of Bengal. He was first stationed at Dacca, then the capital of Bengal, but there he quarrelled with the Governor—Prince Azim-ush-shan, and removed his revenue office in 1707 to the village of Maqsudabad. He changed the name of the place to Murshidabad in honour of himself, and this city became the capital of Bengal for half the 18th century. With the disappearance of Aurangzib from the scene the Mughal Empire began to decline very rapidly, and Murshid Quli became the independent ruler of Bengal (1713). Under his prudent management Bengal rose to the highest degree of prosperity.

Murshid Quli had an only daughter named Zinat-un-nisa.\* When he was holding minor offices in the Deccan he had given her in marriage to Shuja Khan, one of the principal men in the city of Burhanpur, and, by origin, a Turk of the Afshar clan. Shuja continued to live with his father-in-law as a member of his family. This union no doubt became a source of preferment to

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\* In the *Mutaqherin* Zinat-un-nisa appears to have also another name *Nafisa*, but according to the *Ri'ayaz-us-salatin* (p. 322), *Nafisa* was Saifaraz's sister.

him, as Murshid Quli, shortly after his own appointment as Diwan of Bengal, procured for him the Subahdari of Orissa. But Shuja soon became involved in differences with his father-in-law and found life at the Court of Murshid Quli unpleasant. He, therefore, installed himself in Orissa, and personally inspected the affairs of his government.

Though a lover of justice, kind, and popular with his subjects, Shuja had a very great weakness for women. Zinat-un-nisa, with all her virtues, failed to reclaim him. This, added to his hostile attitude towards her father, alienated her heart from her husband. She left him and, with her son Sarfaraz, took up her residence in the city of Murshidabad, where she lived in great splendour and would probably have continued long in the enjoyment of her wealth had not a man appeared on the scene to overturn her family.

In the beginning of Muhammad Shah's reign (*circa* 1720) an adventurer named Mirza Muhammad presented himself at the Court of Shuja Khan. Driven onward by abject poverty he came to Orissa to try his luck. His wife, being of the Afshar tribe, was in some way related to Shuja Khan, who was glad to oblige a relation by taking him into his service. Mirza Muhammad had two sons—Haji Ahmad and Aliwardi who, being men of ability, soon attracted the notice of Shuja Khan. Bold and energetic, Aliwardi combined military genius with the political abilities of his brother and was promoted to the highest offices in rapid succession. In fact, both the brothers were instrumental in securing Shuja Khan's rise to the *masnad* after Murshid Quli's death.

Murshid Quli, displeased with Shuja Khan and now feeling the approach of death, formed the desire of raising his grandson Sarfaraz to the throne, and accordingly wrote to his agents at the Court of Delhi to secure his sovereign's sanction. Shuja, hearing of this project,

took counsel with Haji Ahmad and Aliwardi, and immediately despatched an envoy to the capital with the object of securing the patents of Diwan and Nazim for the provinces of Bengal and Orissa in his own name. Then, hearing that his father-in-law was on his death-bed, Shuja Khan set out from Cuttack in hot haste during the rains, accompanied by Aliwardi and at the head of a considerable force. On the way to Murshidabad, he got intelligence of the old Nawab's death (1725) and a few days later, while yet on the march, he received the necessary patents from Delhi. Having arrived at Murshidabad, he made an entry into the *Chehel-setun* (Hall of Forty Pillars) where he proclaimed himself the lawful Subahdar of Bengal and Orissa.

Sarfaraz Khan, who was living with his mother, Zinat-un-nisa, in a country-seat about a couple of miles outside the city, wanted to oppose his father, but Zinat being a woman of remarkable prudence and sagacity and greatly loved and respected by Sarfaraz, dissuaded him. She represented to him that his father—an old man—could not long keep him out of the throne, so that he ought to be satisfied, for the time being, with the Diwanship of Bengal, and not to be guilty of the horrid impiety of taking up arms against his father. These arguments prevailed with him so well, that he immediately advanced to kiss the feet of his father. Shuja then paid his wife a visit and expressed his regret for the wrong he had done her. Zinat-un-nisa forgave him.

At this time the province of Bihar was annexed to the viceroyalty of Bengal, and Shuja thought of sending a suitable deputy there. He wanted to appoint one of his two sons there. But Zinat-un-nisa would not part with her son, Sarfaraz, nor would she approve of the appointment of Taqi Khan, her stepson. At last, the choice fell on Aliwardi Khan (1729). Zinat-un-nisa seems to have insisted on her being recognized as the sole and



real heiress to the Government and the estate of Jafar Khan, and her husband being regarded rather as the viceroy-consort than viceroy in his own right. "She sent for Aliwardi to the gate of her apartment, and having ordered a rich *khilat* to be put upon his shoulders, she conferred upon him the Government of Bihar, as from herself." (*Mutaqherin*, i. 282). After this investiture, Aliwardi was presented by Shuja Khan on his part with the *khilat* of the deputy governorship of Patna. Aliwardi received on this occasion the title of *Mahabat Jang Bahadur*.

The mild and peaceful government of Shuja Khan terminated in 1739. He left two dangerous enemies to his son and successor Sarfaraz in the persons of Aliwardi and Haji Ahmad. In 1736, Haji Ahmad had secretly obtained from the Emperor of Delhi a farman empowering Aliwardi to hold the government of Bihar independently of the viceroy of Bengal. The affair could not, however, be kept a secret very long, but Shuja Khan had no time to counteract this move before his death. Both the brothers had, owing to their influence, created a host of enemies at the Court with whose help Sarfaraz could have checked their growing ambition, had he not rendered himself odious to all by his unbridled licentiousness. One day, he became impatient to have a sight of the exquisite beauty of the daughter-in-law of Jagat Seth, and forced her from his house. This was a direct blow to the family honour of the greatest banker in Bengal, and the crafty Haji joined the mortified Seth in a conspiracy to get rid of the debauched Nawab.

The plan was ready. But so long as the Haji remained at Murshidabad, Aliwardi could not throw off the mask. The foolish Nawab was, therefore, cleverly induced by the conspirators to dismiss Haji Ahmad from his Court, who with half-concealed joy proceeded

to Patna to join his brother. Aliwardi immediately set out on a march to Murshidabad, craftily writing to the Nawab that "he was oppressed with grief to find he had so many enemies at Court, who, by their misrepresentations, had persuaded him to disgrace his brother; that he was coming to fling himself at his feet, and prove himself his loyal servant." (Scrafton, p. 37). The Nawab's suspicion of Aliwardi's motive was lulled by the traitors in his Court, and he was roused from his slumber only to find Aliwardi knocking at the gates of his capital. He had at least personal courage and would not give way to the rebels. He opposed the invader at Gheria and fell on the field, being the only Nawab of Bengal to die a soldier's death.

Two days after this sanguinary battle, Aliwardi entered the city of Murshidabad with great pomp and magnificence. Before taking his seat on the *masnad*, he went to the house of Zinat-un-nisa, bowed down his head before the Princess and, after supplicating her forgiveness, addressed her in deep emotion, "What was written in the books of Fate has now come to pass, and the ingratitude of this worthless servant of yours will ever remain a blot on the pages of his history. But I swear that up to the last moment of my life I shall never fail to show respect to you. I hope that the perfidy of this slave will in time be obliterated from the mirror of your forgiving mind, and that you shall at a distant date at least condescend to accept, in extenuation of my misdeed, the marks of perfect submission and dutiful attachment which I am resolved to display."

But Zinat-un-nisa, overpowered with grief at the loss of her son, made no response to this speech. (*Mutaqherin*, i. 340).

Aliwardi ascended the throne of Murshidabad. He had given his three daughters—Ghasiti, Maimana and Amina—in marriage to Nawazish Muhammad, Sayyid

Ahmad and Zain-un-din Ahmad—the three sons of his eldest brother, and they were now given the governorship of three different provinces in his kingdom.

Nawazish Muhammad, the Governor of Dacca, persuaded Zinat-un-nisa to remove herself to his palace and to be adopted as his mother. He vested her with the absolute control over his whole household, and her orders were carried out without reference to Nawazish. But she never appeared before him without a veil or a curtain intervening between them, even while rendering account.

Zinat-un-nisa adopted Aga Baba, the son of a concubine of Sarfaraz Khan, born on the very day the latter was slain. This boy became the darling of her heart and the consolation of her old age. She proposed to marry him to one of the daughters of Sayyid Ahmad, to whom she sent a message by Ghasiti Bibi herself. Sayyid Ahmad at first declined the proposal, but at the importunities of Nawazish Muhammad and his wife, he had to give his consent at last.

Both Nawazish and his consort Ghasiti paid Zinat the utmost deference, and vied with each other in soothing her by every mark of respect and attention.

“She likewise conserved the *khas-taluq*, or personal demesnes of Jafar Khan, her father, (a tract of ground that yielded a large revenue) with every land or house that had been bought by that Prince in his private capacity. To these Nawazish Muhammad Khan never offered to touch, and she continued to enjoy them totally, being to the very last used with the utmost respect and deference both by him and by Aliwardi Khan himself, neither of whom ever approached her without a profound bow, or ever offered to sit in her presence, without being bid.” (*Mutaqherin*, i. 356).

History is silent as to how long she lived, but the remains of a masjid, erected by her at Azimnagar, about half a mile to the north of the Murshidabad Palace, still exist, and in the vicinity of the ruins it is said, the royal lady was buried.

## SHARF-UN-NISA

(*Wife of Nawab Aliwardi Khan*)

MUSALMAN noble ladies of Bengal during the 18th century occupied a different position from what they hold now. They had not as yet come under the strict seclusion of the present day, nor did they refrain from taking an active part in the affairs of their husbands, whether peaceful or warlike. Their influence in politics and society alike was powerful and often beneficent. Such a lady was Sharf-un-nisa, the consort of Aliwardi Khan, the Nawab of Bengal.

Although Aliwardi Khan had gained the throne with ease, he was not destined to enjoy a peaceful reign. In the year following his accession, the Marathas—whom Aurangzib had slighted with the epithet of ‘Mountain Rats’—invaded Bengal to enforce their claim, sanctioned by the decadent Emperor of Delhi, to the payment of *chauth* (or fourth part of the revenue of the province). The leader of the first Maratha incursion was Bhaskar Pandit, the *diwan* of Raghuji Bhonslé, Rajah of Nagpur. Aliwardi met the invaders near Bardwan and a hot action ensued. The troops of Aliwardi, worn out by their long march, broke before the Maratha onslaught and for a time the Nawab’s Begam, who had taken part in the battle, was in danger of being captured. The Marathas hemmed in the Begam’s elephant *Landah* and it was only the extreme valour of Musahib Khan Mohmand, son of Umar Khan the Bengal general, that saved her (*Riyaz-us-salatin*, pp. 338-9).

It is, indeed, interesting to observe that Sharf-un-nisa played the rôle of the supreme political officer whilst her husband fought the battles with the Marathas.

The Begam had before this ventured into the battle of Balasore, by the side of her husband, when Aliwardi had advanced to wrest the province of Orissa from Murshid Quli Khan, the brother-in-law of Nawab Sarfaraz Khan (*Riyaz*, p. 329).\*

Aliwardi brought about the death of Bhaskar Pandit by treachery, whereupon Raghuji Bhonslé invaded Bengal with a vast army to avenge his murder. With dauntless courage and consummate military skill, the Nawab opposed the freebooter and in several skirmishes vanquished him. He was, however, sorely troubled on account of the treachery of his Afghan commander, Shamshir Khan. Ghulam Husain, the author of the *Mutaqherin*, and a near relation of the Nawab, writes thus about the affair :

“I remember that once being myself seated within the inner apartment of the Nawab Begam, consort to Aliwardi Khan, he came himself unexpectedly, and having taken his seat, he seemed grieved and thoughtful. The Princess.....asked the meaning of his appearing with so clouded an aspect, he answered in these words : I know not what is the matter; but I find some uncommon appearance amongst my people. The Princess anxious about her consort's disquietude, pitched upon two men of parts and character, and sent them as from herself, and in her own name, to Raghuji..... They had orders to procure a pacification upon an equality, if they saw any overture for it. The envoys

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\* Durdana Begam, Nawab Sarfaraz Khan's sister, was another lady who exercised great influence on Bengal politics. She was the wife of Murshid Quli Khan, the Governor of Orissa, and was more respected in the province than her husband himself. Durdana continually incited her husband to avenge the murder of her brother, but Murshid Quli, overawed by the superior military talents and the strength of Aliwardi's forces, hesitated to encounter him. The high-spirited Princess at last threatened that if he failed to assert himself, she would abandon so tame a husband and make over her riches and the province of Orissa to Mirza Baqir Khan, her son-in-law. Ultimately Murshid Quli had to give way to wife's influence. (For life of Durdana, see *Mutaqherin*, i. 348-50, 353-55; *Riyaz-us-salatîn*).

having landed at Mir Habib's, who was the main supporter of all Raghuji's schemes, were introduced by him, and they delivered their message. The Maratha, who had been often vanquished... was glad of such a proposal; but Mir Habib, who was the viceroy's mortal enemy, did not consent to it; and he turned Raghuji's mind entirely, advising him to avail himself of his superiority in horse to give the enemy the slip, so as to arrive before him at Murshidabad, where Nawazish Muhammad Khan commanded without troops, and where mighty things might be done. Raghuji relishing the advice, took the road of Murshidabad, and was immediately followed by the Bengal army."

In a battle fought near Katwa, Raghuji lost most of his men and was forced to leave Bengal,—very much humbled by the ill-success of his expedition.

The Nawab now disgraced and dismissed the Afghan commanders who were suspected of collusion with the Marathas. They retaliated shortly afterwards by compassing the death of Zain-ud-din Ahmad (the Governor of Patna, and son-in-law of the Nawab) and imprisoning his wife Amina Begam. But in the battle that followed they were defeated with great slaughter and Amina was rescued.

After the tragic death of Zain-ud-din, the Nawab appointed Sayyid Ahmad Khan, his second nephew and son-in-law, as the Governor of Patna. Sayyid Ahmad began to engage in his service on suitable pensions a number of persons of distinction who had formerly belonged to the Court of Zain-ud-din and had been dispersed only by his death.

"This liberality was not relished by Aliwardi Khan's consort, who observed, that as the province of Azimabad was so situated as to be the main gate that afforded an entrance into Bengal, to which country no army could penetrate without its Governor's concurrence, it was improper to leave so important a post in the hands of a person which she styled a stranger; that her

eldest son-in-law, Nawazish Muhammad Khan, being a man of a weak conduct, and of weaker intellects, it became evident that on her husband's demise, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, although her son-in-law likewise, would become a sworn enemy to her other daughters, and of course to her two grand-children, Siraj-ud-daula, and his younger brother Ikram-ud-daula. After such a chain of reasoning she concluded that so important a Government ought to be lodged in such hands as she might trust entirely. The Princess having said so much, lowered her tone of voice, and with an air of concern and affliction, she mentioned the high salaries and expensive pensions which her nephew had been bestowing upon the principal nobility of the province; and she glossed over them as upon so many misdemeanours, which took their rise in deep schemes, and concealed remote views and high-flown designs. Such a speech from a Princess, that had given her husband the highest opinion of her wisdom, could not but make a deep impression on his mind; but the Princess, as if doubting her own influence in instilling her own jealousies in her husband's mind, took care to employ another engine, still more powerful. She taught Siraj-ud-daula to mutter publicly that if the viceroyalty of Azimabad was bestowed on Sayyid Ahmad Khan, he (Siraj) would not survive the affront, but would make away with himself. He used to say that the Bahar was his father's property. That it came to him by hereditary right, as a paternal estate, and ought not to be given away to others. Words to that effect, from a youth who had now become the old man's whole delight, and his very soul, could not fail to sink deep in his mind, on the first moment of their being reported to him. His whole soul centred in that young man; and to give him the least uneasiness, was a thought which he could not bear. On the other hand, he was accustomed to pay the highest deference to his consort's advice, and the tenderest regard to her wishes; and he also confessed, that after all, her opinion tended to the completion of a scheme which he had set up with her concurrence, namely, that of declaring Siraj-ud-daula heir to his estate, and his successor in all his dominions. No wonder then, if overcome now by the

intreaties of a beloved consort, and unable to withstand Siraj-ud-daula's displeasure, he altered his mind with respect to his other grandson and nephew, and totally declined to fulfil his promise to him." (*Mutaqherin*, ii. 65-66).

Sharf-un-nisa, although herself a virtuous lady, was not happy in her daughters, whose frailty was notorious. Ghasiti, the eldest, made secret love to Husain Quli Khan, the favourite deputy of her husband Nawazish Muhammad (then Governor of Dacca). Through her influence Husain Quli became an important personage in the State and many of his misdeeds were forgotten.\* But Husain Quli soon drifted away from Ghasiti and attached himself to Amina, her younger sister and the mother of Siraj-ud-daula, and thus made Ghasiti her enemy. A clandestine relationship, however carefully guarded, is sure to be revealed, and Sharf-un-nisa was shocked when she heard of the depravity of her daughters. She tried to turn them back from the path of vice, and to separate Husain Quli, the root of the evil, from them; but being unsuccessful in her efforts, she as a last measure approached Nawab Aliwardi to ask leave to put Husain Quli to death. The Nawab only contented himself with answering that it could not be done without the consent of Nawazish Muhammad Khan, whose deputy Husain Quli was. This Sharf-un-nisa undertook to procure. She applied to her son-in-law, through the medium of his consort, Ghasiti, who now found a splendid opportunity to wreak her vengeance on her inconstant lover. She joined her mother in persuading Nawazish Muhammad Khan, who weakly consented to the proposal, and Siraj caused Husain Quli to be brutally murdered at the close of the year 1754.

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\* For dismissal of Husain Quli and his reinstatement through the intercession of Ghasiti, see *Mutaqherin*, i. 422,



Sharf-un-nisa was a very kind-hearted lady. When after the seizure of Calcutta by Nawab Siraj-ud-daula the survivors of the Black Hole were sent to Murshidabad (7 July, 1756) and imprisoned, it was chiefly due to her intercession that the prisoners were liberated.\*

Her last days were as dark as the beginning of her life had been bright. Siraj-ud-daula, after his reverse at Plassey, was foully murdered and Mir Jafar was raised to the *masnad* by the English. Miran, as wicked as his father, sent Sharf-un-nisa, her two daughters—Ghasiti and Amina, and Lutf-un-nisa (widow of Siraj-ud-daula) and her young daughter to Dacca as prisoners. Sharf-un-nisa and Lutf-un-nisa, and the latter's young daughter, escaped the violent watery grave which ended the sorrows of Ghasiti and Amina. They were released through the exertions of Lord Clive, the Governor of Bengal, and came back to Murshidabad. We find the seal of Sharf-un-nisa, among others, on an *arzi* submitted to the Governor in December, 1765, begging to be granted a subsistence allowance.

Holwell has not forgotten to pay a tribute to this remarkable lady. He describes her as—

“a woman whose wisdom, magnanimity, benevolence, and every amiable quality, reflected high honor on her sex and station. She much influenced the Usurper's councils, and was ever consulted by him in every material movement in the State, except when sanguinary and treacherous measures were judged

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\* “The 16th July, 1756, in the morning an old female attendant, on Aliwardi Khan's Begam paid a visit to our Shaikh and discoursed half an hour with him. Overhearing part of the conversation to be favourable to us, I obtained the whole from him; and learned that, at a feast the preceding night, the Begam had solicited our liberty, and that the Suba had promised, he would release us on the morrow. . . . Whether this was the result of his own sentiments or the consequence of his promise the night before to the old Begam, I owe our freedom to both.” Letter from J. Z. Holwell, to William Davis, from on board the *Syren* sloop, 28th Feby., 1757. Hill's *Bengal*, iii. 151-52.

necessary, which he knew she would oppose, as she ever condemned them when perpetrated, however successful, —predicting always that such politics would end in the ruin of his family.\*

Sharf-un-nisa was indeed a great lady. She, who could with the placidity of a veteran, witness a battlefield and its carnage and agony, who could retain her courage even when surrounded and captured by enemies, and who never failed to stand by her husband in deadly peril, was undoubtedly a jewel of her sex. She enhanced the splendour of State functions, but was modest in her home life—a skilful nurse in sickness—a sound counsellor in adversity. Aliwardi used to pay the tenderest regard to her wishes, and she became the prime mover of all the good deeds done by him. Even the private life of the Nawab was influenced in a great measure by the charming personality of his consort, and unlike the usual run of Muhammadan Princes, Nawab Aliwardi was always extremely temperate in life and had no other wife or even slave-girl in his harem.

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\* Holwell's *Interesting Historical Events*, Pt. I, Chap. II, pp. 170-71.

## THE BEGAM OF MOTI JHIL

**G**HASITI BEGAM,\* the eldest daughter of Nawab Aliwardi Khan, filled a prominent place in the history of Bengal during the 18th century. With her life are intimately connected some of the incidents which led to the rupture between the English East India Company and Nawab Siraj-ud-daula, a rupture which culminated in the battle of Plassey, the downfall of the Nawab and the foundation of the British Empire in India.

Ghasiti was married by her father to his nephew Nawazish Muhammad Khan, who was made Governor of Dacca by the Nawab. Wild in his youth, Nawazish had settled down with age and, being childless, adopted as his son Ikram-ud-daula (Fazl Quli), the younger brother of Siraj, who became the only comfort of his life.

Zain-ud-din Ahmad (Haibal Jang), father of Siraj-ud-daula, had been killed by some mutinous Afghan mercenaries (1747), and with him too had perished his father, Haji Ahmad. Nawab Aliwardi, leaving aside the claims of his two surviving nephews Sayyid Ahmad, the Governor of Purnea, and Nawazish Muhammad—proclaimed Siraj-ud-daula, as his heir in 1752.† From that time Nawazish began to reside chiefly at Murshidabad with his wife. Ghasiti hated Siraj, while Nawazish's ministers, Husain Quli and his successor Rajballav,

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\* Ghasiti Begam, originally named Mahr-un-nisa (*Mutaqherin*, ii. 109), was popularly called Chhuti Begam, because her husband was known as the Chhuta Nawab. Later, she came to be called the Begam of Moti Jhil, owing to her residence in the Moti Jhil (Lake of Pearls).

† Scrafton's *Reflections on the Government, etc. of Indostan* (London, 1763), p. 52.

appear to have been instrumental in setting up their master as a thorn in the path of Siraj's ambition. Siraj had good grounds to be apprehensive of his uncle, for Nawazish had vast riches and was very popular on account of his mild forgiving disposition and his extensive charities to the poor and friendless. But Nawazish was not destined to live long. Brooding over the death of his adopted son, he fell seriously ill, and his life was despaired of.

Aliwardi, who had already lost one of his nephews, was sorely grieved to learn the condition of Nawazish. He had him immediately brought to his palace, with his consort, and called in eminent physicians, but to no effect. Ghasiti, although actually in her father's house, trembled lest Siraj, her inveterate enemy, should confine her there, and she planned her escape. Putting herself in a covered chair together with her husband, she repaired to her own lodgings, where the patient ultimately died (December, 1755).<sup>\*</sup> His body was carried to Moti Jhil, a country-seat just outside the city of Murshidabad, which he had built and decorated, and here he was buried. (*Mutaqherin*, ii. 127).

Aliwardi was afflicted with dropsy in his old age and began to sink rapidly. The reins of government virtually fell into the hands of Siraj-ud-daula. Nawazish was his avowed enemy, and Ghasiti with the hoarded wealth of her husband had retired to Moti Jhil. Siraj was in pressing need of money—one of the most powerful engines of war, and he cast longing looks on the property of his wealthy aunt. A pretext for quarrel was not wanting. He ordered his aunt to send him the

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<sup>\*</sup> *Mutaqherin* (ii. 127) gives the date of Nawazish's death as 13 Rabi II, 1169 H. (= 16th January, 1756). This is certainly incorrect, as Mr. Watts, the Chief of the English Factory at Cossimbazar, reported the death of the Chhuta Nawab in his letter, dated 17th December, 1755.—*Public Proceedings*, 20-12-1755, p. 534.

severed head of Mir Nazir Ali, who had stained the honour of the royal family by frequent nightly visits to her bower. She loved Mir Nazir Ali and could not be expected to carry out this inhuman order.\* The quarrel between her and Siraj now blazed forth. The old Nawab Aliwardi tried every means to reconcile them, but in vain.

Ghasiti feared—and with reason—that Siraj, once placed on the *masnad* of Murshidabad, would not only maltreat her, but would also rob her of her property. She declared for Murad-ud-daula (the infant son of Ikram-ud-daula), whom she had adopted as her sole heir, and set up her ward as a rival for the throne against Siraj. She distributed elephants and lakhs of rupees to the troops of her deceased husband and thus raised a large force. Then she fortified herself in the Moti Jhil castle with Nazir Ali.† She was materially assisted in these preparations by a very shrewd man, her *diwan*, Rajah Rajballav.

Immediately after the death of Nawazish, Siraj had called upon his minister—Rajballav—then at Murshidabad, for an account of his uncle's affairs, in order to ascertain the indebtedness of his estate to Government for the revenues of Dacca. But the faithful minister would not disclose anything detrimental to the interests of his mistress, and for this act he was kept under strict surveillance. He was, however, after a few days set at liberty at the request of Amina, the Nawab's mother.‡ Rajballav was fully aware that his devotion to the

\* Trans. of extracts from a MS. entitled *Revolutions in Bengal*, see Hill's *Bengal*, iii. 217.

† *Mutaqherin*, ii. 156; Narrative of the Succession of Siraj-ud-daula, etc. by Governor Drake, dated 19th July, 1756.—Hill's *Bengal*, i. 119.

‡ Letter from J. Z. Holwell to the Court of Directors, dated Fulda, 30th November, 1756.—Hill's *Bengal*, ii. 3.

interests of his mistress had for ever prejudiced Siraj against him, and that the latter would take vengeance when he came to the throne. He, therefore, declared himself a partisan of Ghasiti Begam.

The end of the old Nawab was drawing near and Rajballav felt it very necessary to ensure the safety of his family and property then at Dacca. He immediately wrote a letter to Mr. Watts, the Chief of the English Factory at Cossimbazar, saying that his family in the course of their intended pilgrimage to the Jagannath Temple at Puri, would visit Calcutta, and begging permission for them to stay there for a couple of months.\*

Rajballav had considerable influence over Ghasiti, and his power at Dacca might be of the utmost consequence to the Company's affairs there. Moreover, Siraj was their enemy and Ghasiti was conspiring to thwart his ascent to the throne, and therefore if she succeeded it would be of great benefit to the English. As Rajballav was Ghasiti's right-hand man, the English Company readily consented to Rajballav's proposal, and gave a safe asylum to his family, including his son Krishna Das, on their arrival at Calcutta.

A long series of deaths favoured the accession of Siraj-ud-daula to the throne. He was now free from all possible rivals, except Murad-ud-daula, the protégé of Ghasiti Begam, and his cousin Shaukat Jang, the Governor of Purnea, who had succeeded his father Sayyid Ahmad (d. 6 Feby., 1756). But neither of these rivals was formidable, although their alliance might be dangerous. Shaukat Jang grew jealous of Siraj and, it was suspected, kept up a secret correspondence with Ghasiti. The British thought the accession of Siraj an impossibility owing to his evil reputation,—

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\* *Ibid.* 119-120.

at any rate a disputed succession was anticipated in some quarters. Nawab Aliwardi set himself to avert this. In order to ensure the succession of his favourite grandson, he drew together on the side of Siraj the most influential people at his Court, including his kinsman Mir Jafar, who swore on the Quran to stand by him. But while labouring at the hopeless task of reconciling Siraj with his aunt Ghasiti, the old Nawab died on 10th April, 1756.

Aliwardi was scarcely buried when Siraj-ud-daula proclaimed himself Nawab of Bengal. The next day, to secure himself against his aunt, he surrounded the castle of Moti Jhil so completely that no one from outside could enter it. Strong for defence though the castle was, most of the Begam's troops, despairing of the succour promised by the Governor of Purnea, evacuated it on the third night. At this time Sharf-un-nisa, the widow of Aliwardi, entered the castle to persuade her daughter to make a peaceful surrender by assuring her of the security of her life, liberty and property. Ghasiti agreed to these terms, but demanded in addition that her lover, Nazir Ali, should be allowed to leave Bengal under a safe conduct. The young Nawab readily agreed.

Ghasiti was prevailed upon to disband her troops and return with her attendants to the harem of the Nawab. But on her arrival, she was immediately thrown into confinement, her officers and soldiers were pardoned and taken into Siraj's service, and her palaces and property seized and confiscated to the State.\*

Having thus settled his score with the Begam to his entire satisfaction, Siraj now bought off the Wazir of Oudh, who had threatened an attack on Bengal, by

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\* Siraj's expedition to Moti Jhil,—*Mutaqherin*, ii. 185-86. Hill's *Bengal*, ii. 2; iii. 217-18.

means of a part of his aunt's wealth, which common report had magnified to 32 crores of rupees.

Siraj had now to deal with Shaukat Jang, the Governor of Purnea, and the English, who had been allies of Ghasiti Begam. The English had not yet pulled down the fortifications around Calcutta, erected during the illness of Aliwardi, contrary to the established laws of the country. They had also harboured Krishna Das at Calcutta, who had carried off a fortune which partly belonged to Ghasiti,\* and they had declined to surrender him at the Nawab's demand. These are two of the important reasons which animated Siraj against the English. He seized their Factory at Cossimbazar, marched upon Calcutta, and became master of Fort William (June, 1756). The surviving English traders retired to Fulta, ordered up reinforcements from Madras, and waited for a suitable opportunity to wreak their vengeance.

Siraj next encountered the army of Shaukat Jang, who had not recognized his accession but raised the standard of rebellion. In the fight that ensued near Rajmahal, the Governor of Purnea was shot dead (16 Oct., 1756).

Siraj's triumph now seemed to be complete; but in reality his end was only hastened by the removal of every rival from his path. He had made himself sole master of his country and Court, but in so doing he had alienated several grandees of his Court, notably Mir Jafar, and they now sedulously applied themselves to

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\* "Always led away by the idea that he would not have sufficient influence to get himself recognized as Subahdar they carried on a correspondence with the Begam, and withdrew to Calcutta the treasures which she wished to put in a place of safety and also those of Rajballav, her chief diwan. It is even said they had an understanding with the Nawab of Purnea."—Trans. of the first part of a Memoir by Monsr. Jean Law, Chief of the French Factory at Cossimbazar. Hill's *Bengal*, iii. 163.



overthrow him. With the disappearance of the Governor of Purnea they felt that the English were the only Power which could stand against him, and they joined with these foreign traders in a conspiracy against the Nawab, in which material assistance was rendered by one of his ancient enemies,—Ghasiti Begam.

“She now leagued herself secretly with Mir Jafar Khan, and gave him much assistance, by making interest in his behalf with every one whom she thought to have conserved some attachment to her concerns. To these she presented, by the means of trusty advocates, a long list of the wrongs she had endured. To these she sent secret messages, to claim at their hands all the rights which Aliwardi Khan’s daughter, and Nawazish Muhammad Khan’s consort, must have acquired over their gratitude. She recalled to their minds all the favours they had received from her family, recapitulated the violences she had suffered, and exhorted them to join Mir Jafar Khan. And as in the moment that preceded the capture of Moti Jhil, she had contrived to secret some gold, by the means of some trusty old women and eunuchs, she now took care to distribute it adroitly; and she even sent some to Mir Jafar Khan. This General on his side distributed his money wherever he thought it would be effectual; and he exerted himself so well in taking in his pay every disbanded soldier, and every hungry adventurer he heard of, that he soon assembled secretly in his house and in his quarter a very respectable force. Affairs being now come to that point; and every one of the grandees tending to one common centre in view, which was to remove Siraj-ud-daula; every one pointed his efforts that way; every one, firmly persuaded that the concurrence of the English was a necessary piece to the completion of his wishes, was exhorting them to break with that Prince. Jagat Seth was one of the foremost of them, and he had also the best opportunities. By the means of his mercantile agent. Amin Chund, one of the principal bankers of Calcutta. he was perpetually exciting the English to a rupture.” (*Mutaqherin*, ii. 228).

The result of the activities of the conspirators was the battle of Plassey, which decided the fate of Bengal in favour of the English, who raised the arch-traitor—Mir Jafar—to the *masnad* of Murshidabad.

Siraj was foully murdered by order of Miran, the brutal son of Mir Jafar. The perfidious man did not remember the obligation which past favours from the house of Aliwardi ought to have imposed upon him. He shut up in a prison the consort of Aliwardi Khan and her two daughters as well as Lutf-un-nisa, the widow of Siraj-ud-daula, with her infant daughter. When they had undergone the rigours of prison life for some months, they were packed off to Dacca in some miserable boats (December, 1758).

Miran was evidently bent on removing every obstacle from his path. Strangely enough, he even suspected Ghasiti and Amina of being his enemies, although they were now in exile, forgotten, and reduced to poverty and distress. He repeatedly wrote to Jasarat Khan, the Governor of Dacca, to put those aged and unfortunate ladies to death. But Jasarat was a generous soul and owed his bread and preferment to those ladies and to their deceased husbands. He replied by begging that a successor might be appointed in his place, as he wished to be excused from carrying out such an odious task. Miran was then busy making preparations to lead an expedition against Khadim Husain Khan (nephew of Mir Jafar) who was at that time creating disturbances on the other side of Patna, and he therefore deputed a friend of his to Dacca with instructions to induce his intended victims to embark in a boat by deceitfully giving them to understand that they would be sent to Murshidabad, and to sink the boat in mid-stream.

Preparatory to this iniquity, Ghasiti and Amina

were conveyed to a lonely place. But Miran's real intention was betrayed by the emotion and tears of his agent. "Mother," said he to the eldest sister, "you have eaten nothing the whole day; eat something, for you are going to take a long journey, and—" here he was interrupted by his own tears and sobs.

Ghasiti took fright and shed tears, but the younger Amina endeavoured to console and pacify her: "Sister," said she, "why such fears and why weep? We are destined to die one day; let that day be this." Here she paused, and assuming a calmer tone added: "Sister, as we have been great sinners ourselves, we ought to thank God, that we are offered this method of expiation, and that we are not going without having placed our own load on the shoulders of Miran."

The Begams, after performing the purifying ablutions (*wazu*) and putting on clean clothes, begged God to pardon their sins, and then bade the man execute his master's orders. The agent seeming to hesitate, they both raised their hands, and Amina exclaimed, "O God Almighty, we are both sinners and culprits, but we have done no harm to Miran. On the contrary, he owes everything in the world to us, nor have we had any other return from him than this unjust order to put us to death. We hope, therefore, that after our death, Thou sendest Thine lightning to crush his guilty head, and to exact from him a full revenge on our own account and on that of our children." After these few words, they joined their hands together and sought a watery grave (June, 1760).\*

Their last prayer was heard. A few days after this tragic event, when Miran was in pursuit of the

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\* *Mutaqherin*, ii. 281, 368-370. See also *Riyaz-us-salatîn*, p. 331; *Jamiu-t-tawarikh* in Elliot, viii. 428-29; Holwell's *An Address to the Proprietors of East India Stock*, p. 45.

vanquished rebel Khadim Husain, a thunderbolt descended amidst a rainstorm, and struck him dead (1 July, 1760).\*

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\* Select Committee Proceedings, 24th July 1760, vide *An Abstract of the Early Records of the Foreign Department, 1756-1762*—S. C. Hill, p. 65.

Jean Law of Lauriston disbelieved this official story of Miran's death. He was of opinion that Miran was assassinated, the tent being set on fire during a thunderstorm to conceal the crime. (*Memoire*, ed. Martineau, Paris 1913, p. 452).

## AMINA BEGAM

(*Mother of Nawab Siraj-ud-daula*)

**A**MINA BEGAM was the youngest daughter of Nawab Aliwardi Khan. He gave her in marriage to his youngest and favourite nephew, Zain-ud-din Ahmad Khan, who was made Governor of Patna.

Aliwardi had started his career in the Court of Shuja Khan, Nawab of Bengal, and by dint of ability soon made himself a great favourite of the Nawab. Shuja Khan raised him to the governorship of the frontier province of Bihar in 1729. Shuja was succeeded by his son Sarfaraz Khan in 1739, and it was from the latter that Aliwardi ungratefully wrested the *masnad* of Murshidabad—one of the few acts that constitute a blot on his character.

A few days before Aliwardi was appointed to the governorship of Patna, Amina gave birth to a child, whom Aliwardi adopted as his own and named Mirza Muhammad, and who was later known as Nawab Siraj-ud-daula. The fact of his birth practically coinciding with his grandfather's appointment doubly endeared Mirza Muhammad to Aliwardi.

Aliwardi was always averse to unnecessary bloodshed, and his daughter, Amina Begam, too inherited this humane characteristic. A generous and tender-hearted lady, her advice to her son, Siraj-ud-daula, was always to be merciful. In 1756, a quarrel broke out between the English and Siraj-ud-daula, then Nawab of Bengal. He was determined to drive them out of Bengal, but his mother, Amina "tried to restrain him by the reproach that he was going to measure his strength against (mere)

merchants.”\* He, however, declined to follow her advice, and seized the English Factory at Kasimbazar, made its chief—Mr. Watts, with his wife (afterwards Begam Johnson) and children prisoners, and then marching on Calcutta made himself master of Fort William (June, 1756).

But the compassionate nature of Amina Begam soon led to the release of Mr. Watts and his family.

“The Begam took Mrs. Watts and her little ones into her *zenana*, where she was treated with the utmost kindness and respect. After the lapse of thirty-seven days, while the Nawab still continued in the neighbourhood of Calcutta, the Begam contrived to send her guest by river under escort to Chandernagar, where the French Governor hospitably entertained her. The Begam next, at the urgent instance of her son’s wife, induced him to release Mr. Watts, who thereupon rejoined his family.”†

The interest of the Begams of the Nawab’s family in the safety of the English merchants may have been partly due to the fact that they used to trade on their own account through these foreign merchants. Dr. Forth mentions how very angry Amina Begam was with Amin Chand (Omichand) for forestalling the sale of her consignment of opium and saltpetre at Calcutta :

“About two years ago he [Omichand] had got a large Persia cat, which he sent to the old Nabob. I happened to be at the *Durbar* that morning when his *gomastah* brought it in. Finding the old man very much pleased with it he took the opportunity to acquaint the Nabob that Omichand had a quantity of opium and saltpetre lying at Jullongee which came down with the Begum’s opium (the present Nabob’s

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\* Translation of a letter from M. Le Conte to M. Courtin at Dacca, dated Chandernagar, 19th June, 1756—Hill’s *Bengal*, i. 20.

† Hyde’s *Parochial Annals of Bengal*, p. 158; also Hill’s *Bengal*, i. lx, 176.

mother) that was to go altogether to Hughly, but that remaining there so long he should loose the opportunity of selling it; begged that the Nabob would give an order that he might take out his concern from the Begum's and send it down in boats of his own. This was immediately granted, the opium and saltpetre was taken out and sent down. I had occasion to go from the *Durbar* to the Begum's who was at that time my patient. When I came in she was very angry having just heard of the order obtained, and said that Omichand could have anything he asked, ever to her prejudice, and that the Nabob had granted him leave to take his opium away, which he would sell first and she would loose the sale of hers. She wanted the old Nabob (her father) to recall the order but in vain."\*

In June 1746 Siraj-ud-daula was married with great pomp at Murshidabad. His father, Zain-ud-din Ahmad (Governor of Patna) and mother, Amina Begam, were present on the occasion. Zain-ud-din during his stay at Murshidabad cast an envious eye on the power and wealth of his two brothers—Nawazish Muhammad and Sayyid Ahmad—and on the Court of his uncle, Nawab Aliwardi; and counting on the weakness of the two former, and on the old age of the latter, he concluded that he would gain an easy victory in a contest for the throne.

On his return to Patna he became anxious to win over to his side two Afghan captains Shamshir Khan and Sardar Khan of Darbhanga. He now proposed to Nawab Aliwardi that these two chiefs, with 3,000 of their best horse, might be attached to his army as, to drive them out of the province was no easy task, and to suffer them to fortify themselves was not only inexpedient but dangerous.

Aliwardi was at first very much displeased at this

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\* Letter from Dr. W. Forth to Mr. Drake at Fulda, dated Chinsura, 16th December, 1756.—*Hill's Bengal*, ii. 63-64.

proposal as these two Afghan *sardars* had been dismissed from his Court on account of their<sup>a</sup> collusion with the Maratha chief Raghuji Bhonslé when he invaded Bengal; and more so as he suspected them to be secret aspirants for independence.

But at last Nawab Aliwardi gave his consent in order to oblige his son-in-law. Zain-ud-din now invited the Afghans to join his command. They, having ambitious designs of their own, readily accepted the proposal and left Darbhanga for Patna.

Zain-ud-din was distributing betel (*pán*) as a mark of special favour to the large number of the Afghans who thronged his Court, for presenting *nazars*, when one of them suddenly cut him down with one stroke of his sabre. A terrible scene of confusion and dismay followed. But his consort, Amina Begam, had the presence of mind to barricade the gates of the *zenana* or women's apartments. The Afghans now surrounded the palace and subjected Haji Ahmad, father of Zain-ud-din, to inhuman tortures for several days, in order to make him disgorge the hidden treasures. The old man ultimately succumbed to their violence.\*

While the city was a prey to all the horrors of sack and violence, a report spread that Nawab Aliwardi was advancing upon it by forced marches. Shamshir Khan and his nephew, Murad-shir Khan, on receipt of this news hastened to seize the family of the murdered prince. With singular heartlessness they sent open carriages, for Amina Begam and her children. Without the semblance of a veil or protection these high-born ladies were paraded through the streets of the city to the great indignation of the people. (*Mutaqherin*, ii. 43-44).

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\* According to Orme (ii. 41) "the unfortunate and high-minded wife of Zain-ud-din found means to convey to him a dose of poison, which in a few hours released him from all his agonies."



The news of this disaster reached Alwardi at Murshidabad, but he was not the man to lose his presence of mind. He immediately made an appeal for support in a council of his friends and companions-in-arms, detailed to them his misfortunes and declared that for him there was only one course left—to kill the murderers, or be killed in the attempt. In conclusion he adjured them to come forward with assistance in this perilous enterprize. These words produced the desired effect. He now began to raise the necessary money, and obtained immense sums from his son-in-law, Nawazish Muhammad, and not a little from his own daughter Bibi Ghasiti and from Jagat Seth. Then the Nawab marched on Patna, gained a complete victory over Shamshir, killing him and almost every high officer of his army, and made a great slaughter of the common soldiers (April 1748). Peace and security were once more established in the city of Patna.†

All this while the unfortunate Amina Begam and her children had been kept prisoners in a tent, subject to all sorts of misery and contumely. They were now brought to the Nawab's quarters and the re-union took place amid tears of joy and heartfelt thanksgiving to the Supreme Comforter. (*Mutaqherin*, ii. 56).

Aliwardi was very chivalrous in his treatment of Shamshir Khan's family, who were seeking the protection of the zamindar of Bettiah. He had them brought to his seraglio with all respect and consideration, declaring that he had no quarrel with women and that he wanted to show the world that he was not like Shamshir Khan.

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† "The 26th ultimo We received a letter from Edward Eyles, Esq., the Chief and Council at Cossimbazar, dated 23rd April advising that their vakils had brought them news of the Nawab's victory over Shamshir Khan who with Murad-shir Khan was killed in battle at Culloidi."—*Bengal Public Consultation*, May 1748 (p. 25, also p. 33).

Amina was, alas, a frail daughter of Eve. After the death of her husband, she "became famous in Murshidabad by her amours and gallantry"—says the translator of the *Mutaqherin* (i. 282*n*, also ii. 124*n*). Like her eldest sister, Ghasiti Bibi, she also fell in love with Husain Quli, who had to pay dearly for this illicit amour (*ibid.* ii. 125). Even Ghulam Husain, the author of the *Mutaqherin*, and a near relation of Aliwardi, remarks :

"In the zenith of the conqueror's [Aliwardi's] power, such infamies and lewdness came to be practised by some females and other persons of his family, as cannot be mentioned with decency, but effectually dishonoured his family for ever. All his daughters, as well as his beloved Siraj-ud-daula, lapsed into such a flagitious conduct, and they were guilty of such a variety of shameful excesses, as would have disgraced totally any person whatever, still more, persons of their elevated rank and sublime station" (ii. 121).

How Siraj-ud-daula, after the rout at Plassey, was taken prisoner in his attempted flight to Patna, how he was brought back to Murshidabad a captive before Mir Jafar, are well-known facts. The fallen Nawab was hacked to death at the instance of Miran, the brutal son of Mir Jafar. On the following morning his mangled body, thrown across the back of an elephant, was carried through the busy city, thus heralding the accession of the new sovereign—Mir Jafar.

When the elephant with Siraj's corpse on it was passing by his mother's gate a touching scene was acted. Amina Begam knew nothing of the revolution and enquired as to the reason of the commotion outside. On hearing of the calamity, the poor lady forgot her dignity and ran out barefooted, distracted with sorrow. Throwing herself on her son's body she covered it with kisses and sat disconsolately beating her forehead and breast

in her misery. The spectators were greatly moved, and Khadim Husain Khan, the nephew of Mir Jafar, who was enjoying the indignities of his former benefactor's son, seeing the effect of the scene on the multitude, gave the word to his mace-bearers who drove the unfortunate princess and the other ladies who had followed her, back into her house with a good deal of barbarous and needless violence. (*Mutaqherin*, ii. 242-43).

How Amina, along with her eldest sister, Chasiti, heroically met their doom—has already been narrated at length.

## LUTF-UN-NISA BEGAM

(*Wife of Nawab Siraj-ud-daula*)

**I**F woman's lifelong devotion can redeem the memory of wicked man, such will be the fate of Siraj-ud-daula, the Nawab of Bengal. His tragic life, so full of blood and tears—his own and his victims',—was bound up with that of a most faithful wife, whose history supplies one more illustration of the poet's words that "beauty and anguish walk hand in hand."

Lutf-un-nisa first entered the household of the mother of Siraj-ud-daula as a slave-girl. By birth she was a Hindu, as her name Raj Kunwar indicates. The youthful beauty and accomplishments of this maiden conquered the heart of young Siraj. His mother gave her up to him, and he dignified her with the title of Lutf-un-nisa Begam and had a daughter by her.\* She returned the love of Siraj, and was always faithful to him. She was her husband's partner in weal and woe alike, and in influence over his life she completely over-

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\* "*Raj Kunwar* was the name of a slave-girl belonging to the mother of Siraj-ud-daula. The latter taking a liking to Raj Kunwar, his mother gave her up to him. He dignified her with the name of Lutf-un-nisa Begam and by her had a daughter who married Asad Ali Khan." Statement of the surviving members of the family and dependents of the late Siraj-ud-daula. (25 July, 1794).—*Public Con.* 28 July 1794, No. 18. This statement was compiled by Mr. N. B. Edmonstone, the Persian Translator, "from the best information that could be procured."—See Revenue letter to the Court of Directors, dated 29 Dec. 1794, para. 40 (Bengal Govt. Records).

According to *Mutagherin* (text i. 182) also Lutf-un-nisa was originally a *jariya* (bond-maid).

Bevoridge says that Lutf-un-nisa was the sister of Mohan Lall, the Dewan-i-kul of Siraj-ud-daula.—"Old places in Murshidabad," *Calcutta Review*, 1892.

shadowed his legitimate wife, Umdat-un-nisa (Bahu Begam), the daughter of Muhammad Irij Khan.\*

Siraj's father, Zain-ud-din Ahmad (Haibat Jang), the Governor of Bihar, was murdered by the Afghans in the early part of 1748. Nawab Aliwardi, Siraj's grandfather, nominally appointed the youth to his father's place but vested the actual authority in Rajah Janakiram, his deputy. Incited by Mehdi-nisar Khan, and other evil associates, Siraj resolved to take possession of Patna and to declare his independence. He set out for that city in company with Lutf-un-nisa and her mother in a covered carriage drawn by a pair of excellent oxen of amazing size and bulk, which could usually go 60 to 80 miles a day. On his arrival near Patna in the month of June 1750 he called upon the Rajah to deliver up the city. But Janakiram, in the absence of any orders from Nawab Aliwardi, refused to do so. Siraj thereupon assaulted the town, but was ultimately defeated and forced to take refuge in the suburbs. News very soon reached Nawab Aliwardi, who was then engaged with the Marathas, and he came to Patna in hot haste. He received his grandson with the greatest affection, instead of reproaches, and took him back to Murshidabad. (*Mutaqherin*, ii. 94).

At the battle of Plassey (23 June 1757), Siraj-ud-daula was betrayed by his general and kinsman,† Mir Jafar, who owed his fortunes to Nawab Aliwardi's generosity. It was his treachery that brought about the total rout of the unfortunate Nawab who, seeing that all was lost, retired from the field to the Mansurganj Palace

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\* Umdat-un-nisa Bahu Begam was married to Siraj in the rainy season of 1159 H. (c. Augt. 1746)—*Mutaqherin* text. i. 104. She had no children, and died on 10th November, 1793 (5 Rabi-us-sani, 1208 H). See *Public Procdgs.* 24 Jan. 1794, No. 22.

† Mir Jafar had married Shah Khanam, the half-sister of Nawab Aliwardi and mother of Sadiq Ali Khan (Miran).

at Muirshidabad. Fortune turned her back on him, and mankind did the same. Even Muhammad Irij Khan, his father-in-law, refused to stand by him in his adversity. Siraj resolved to escape alone. Lutf-un-nisa fell at his feet and begged him to let her accompany him. Siraj tried to convince her that his flight was merely temporary and that he meant to come back very soon with a strong force to recover his kingdom, but Lutf-un-nisa could not be persuaded to desist from her purpose.

At dead of night on 25th June Siraj loaded his jewels and a large sum of money upon some elephants and, accompanied by Lutf-un-nisa and her young daughter in covered carriages, hastened to Bhagwangola. He was travelling in disguise, like a miserable fugitive, his object being to proceed to Patna, where he hoped once more to raise an army. The heat of the day grew intense. Lutf-un-nisa took every care to mitigate the exhaustion of her husband, and fanned him continually with her handkerchief. At Bhagwangola Siraj and his family embarked in boats, but they were obliged to stop at Bahral, a village 4 miles from Rajmahal, on the other side of the Ganges, as the Nazirpur mouth of the river was not found navigable.

Siraj and his family had gone without food for three days and nights; at Bahral he disembarked and went to the neighbouring mausoleum of a *faqir* named Dana Shah in search of food. The richness of the stranger's slippers aroused the suspicion of the people at the tomb, and they found out who he was from the boatmen. Prompted by the hope of rich rewards, they sent secret information to Mir Qasim, the son-in-law of Mir Jafar, who had come to the neighbourhood with an army, in search of the fugitive Nawab. Siraj was captured with his family and jewels. The fallen prince entreated for his life, but his abject humility only served to call forth the taunts and reproaches of men, to whom,

but a few days before, he would have disdained to speak. "Mir Qasim Khan, who had got Lutf-un-nisa in his power, engaged her, partly by threats, and partly by promises, to disclose where her casket of jewels was; and this casket, the value of which could not be computed but by lakhs, fell in his hands of course." (*Mutaqherin*, ii. 240).

Mir Jafar was holding secret counsel with Clive, when the news of the capture of Siraj-ud-daula reached him. He heaved a sigh of relief, and immediately sent his son, Miran, to bring the prisoner to the city. Eight days after he had quitted it, Siraj was brought back to Murshidabad at about midnight like a common felon, and stood in the presence of Mir Jafar in the very palace where he had once ruled as the absolute master of millions.

It was thought dangerous to grant him his life. Miran was secretly instructed to place the Nawab in confinement at Jafaraganj and there put him to death. The task which many rejected with indignation, was at last accepted by Muhammad Beg, a wretch nourished from his infancy on the favours of Aliwardi's family.

The end of Siraj-ud-daula as described by his contemporary Ghulam Husain (*Mutaqherin*, ii. 242) was tragic in the extreme.

It was night. As soon as Muhammad Beg entered the prison, Siraj started up in alarm and asked, "Have you come to kill me?" The murderer said, "Yes." Then the captive gave himself up to despair and prepared for his end by kneeling down and praying to Allah "the Gracious and the Compassionate" for the pardon of his sins. Turning to Muhammad Beg again, he said in a broken voice: "So, my enemies will not leave me to retire into some corner and pass the rest of my days on a petty allowance. . . I see that I must die and thus atone for Husain Quli's blood which I have shed." His

speech was cut short by Md. Beg suddenly striking him down with his sabre. As the fallen ruler of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa writhed on the ground, the butcher kept on slashing at him, and Siraj's face, so famous throughout the country for its youthful beauty and sweetness, was terribly mangled. "Enough—that is enough—I am done for—Husain Quli! thou art avenged," these were the last words of Siraj. Then his voice was stilled for ever in a pool of blood in that dark dungeon of Murshidabad.\*

Hated and despised by all though he was, Siraj-ud-daula had one faithful mourner in Lutf-un-nisa. She, with her infant daughter of four years, was banished to Dacca by Mir Jafar sometime in December 1758, along with the other ladies of the late Nawab's Court (*Mutaqherin*, ii. 281) where they were kept in confinement for some seven years; even the slender allowance which was ordered for them was not paid regularly. Their hardships and distress in the matter of food and other necessities of life, rendered their lives extremely miserable. Their small allowance began to be paid regularly month by month, only when Muin-ud-daula Muzaffar Jang (Muhammad Riza Khan) came to Dacca as its Governor. It was through the courtesv and kindness of Lord Clive, the Governor of Bengal, that they were released from prison and sent back to Murshidabad.†

On their arrival at Murshidabad the Begams submitted an *arzi* (in December 1765) thanking the English

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\* According to the *Muzaffar-nama* Siraj-ud-daula was born in 1140 H. (= Aug. 1727—July 1728) and ascended the *masnad* in 1169 H. (Oct. 1755—Sept. 1756). He was, therefore, 29 or 30 years of age at his death.

† Holwell, with his usual inaccuracy, says that Lutf-un-nisa and her young daughter were drowned along with Ghasiti and other Begams!—*An Address to the Proprietors of East India Stock*, etc. p. 47.



Government for their release and begging to be granted a subsistence allowance for the rest of their lives. This document bears the seals, among others', of Sharf-un-nisa—wife of Nawab Aliwardi Khan, Lutf-un-nisa and her daughter.\*

It appears that the Company settled on Lutf-un-nisa and her daughter an allowance of Rs. 600 a month for their support. The Begam received her first rude shock when her only daughter lost her husband, Mir Asad Ali Khan. But further misfortunes were in store for her. Even this widowed daughter, the only stay of her life, died at the beginning of 1774, leaving behind her four daughters of tender age—Sharf-un-nisa, Asmat-un-nisa, Sakina, and Amat-ul-mahdi Begams.† The Company, in consideration of the family and the circumstances of Lutf-un-nisa, generously continued the allowance‡ of Rs. 600, assigning Rs. 100 for herself, and Rs. 500 for her grand-daughters. On these orphans attaining their marriageable age, Lutf-un-nisa's pecuniary distress increased and she made the following petition in March 1787 to Governor-General Cornwallis, praying for an adequate pension to enable her to pass the rest of her days in honour and dignity :—

“Since the death of Nawab Siraj-ud-daula and the plunder of the goods and effects of all his relations and specially of myself, I have been tossed about by the waves of oppression and cruelty in the sea of grief and sorrow. I refrain from recapitulating my tale of woe as it can only increase my sorrow, and afflict the hearer. I come, therefore, direct to the point and beg to submit

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\* *Calendar of Persian Correspondence*, i. 452, Letter No. 2761, received by the Governor-General on 10th December 1765

† Petition of Lutf-un-nisa. *R. B. P.* 14 June 1774, No 20 (Bengal Government Records).

‡ Letter to Richard Barwell, Esq. Chief etc. Provincial Council of Revenue at Dacca, dated Fort William 14th June 1774 *Ibid.*, p. 5248.

that on the death of the late Nawab Siraj-ud-daula, Mir Muhammad Jafar Ali Khan sent me to Jahangirnagar [Dacca] and fixed on me an allowance of Rs. 600. When the Company assumed the direct control of the country I came back from Jahangirnagar. Some time after, my daughter died and then the said sum of Rs. 600 was distributed in this way that her four daughters (my grand-daughters) received Rs. 500 among them and Rs. 100 was allotted to my share. As most of my attendants and maidservants have been in my service since the days of the late Nawab, I am unable to dismiss them now, for the name and the honour of the deceased must be maintained. And besides them there are the male servants indispensably necessary for the upkeep of a degree of dignity among the people. But I have no *jagir* nor any such resource as might enable me to meet these expenses, and whatever goods and effects I possessed were plundered after the death of the Nawab. Of the four grand-daughters two are married and their expenditure has therefore increased. The other two are unmarried, which means that the heavy burden of their wedding has yet to be lifted up, and this is beyond my present capacity and means. It is a time-honoured rule, and the cause of justice also demands it—that if ever a chief is found guilty of an offence his wife and children are not held responsible for it in any way. The same has been the practice with the Company with regard to every chief found guilty of unfair and improper conduct, that is the offender has been punished for his misdeeds, while a pension has been fixed for the maintenance of his children and dependents. But my case has been treated as an exception to the rule and I have received no pensions till the present moment by which I could pass my days with some semblance of comfort. I am addressing this petition to you because a kinder, juster, and more generous ruler never came to this land before and pray that you will kindly grant me a pension to enable me to pass the rest of my days in honour and dignity.”\*

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\* *Original Receipts* 1787, No. 176.

But this petition failed to secure any relief of her misery, and she who had once been the beloved consort of the King of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa had to end her days on the petty allowance of Rs. 100 a month.\*

A virtuous woman, loving and tender. Lutf-un-nisa ever cherished the memory of her lord and rejected with scorn several proposals of marriage after the death of her husband and, on one occasion, her reply to her suitor was that a person accustomed to ride an elephant, could not stoop to ride a donkey. (*Muzaffar-nama*, p. 106). She was placed in charge of the Khush Bagh cemetery,† on the right bank of the Bhagirathi, opposite Moti Jhil at Murshidabad. Nawab Aliwardi and his favourite grandson, Siraj-ud-daula, lie here side by side. Lutf-un-nisa used to receive Rs. 305 per month for the maintenance of the *qaris* (readers of the Quran) and the *langar* (charity-kitchen) and other expenses connected with their graves.‡ She frequented the tomb of her husband and for many years employed Muhamma-

\* Lutf-un-nisa had some property at Patna,—the masjid, madrasa, and house built by Siraj-ud-daula's father in that city.—*Vol. of Eng. Transl. of Pers. Letters Received*, 22 Feby. 1790

A letter of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Patna, dated 4 July 1774, gives the nature of her property at Patna :—

"... The fund appropriated to the support of the tomb [of Zain-ud-din] arose from the profits on Akbarpur Roani, a muqarrari village in Pargana Azimabad, and the duties collected in Mandovi Begampur, a ganj adjoining to the tomb. . . The ganj was the principal source and stood exempted from the Government's taxes by a *sanad* procured from the King by Mahabat Jang in 1156." *R. B. P.* 19 July 1774, Nos 19-20 (Bengal Government Records).

The collection from Begampur amounted to Rs. 1,000 a year.

† "This cemetery was first endowed by Aliwardi Khan, who allotted Rs. 305 monthly, from the collections of the villages of Bandardeh and Nawabganj, to defray the expenses of keeping the place in order."—Hunter's *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. vi., see *Murshidabad*.

‡ Lutf-un-nisa to the Governor-General, Recd. on 23 Sep. 1780.—*Original Receipts*.

dan priests (*mullahs*) to say prayers there.\* She would often strew flowers on the earth covering his last remains and, it is said, she breathed her last in November 1790 while in the act of adoration at his grave.† She survived her husband for 34 years, and lies buried by his side, in the Khush Bagh ('the Garden of Happiness'), which is still extant and proclaims the unshaken fidelity of Lutf-un-nisa.

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\* *Journey from Bengal to England*, Geo. Forster (1798), i. 12. Letter dated 31st August, 1782.

† "After compliments we beg to report that our grandmother, Lutf-un-nisa Begam, has died."—Grand-daughters of Nawab Siraj-ud-daula to the Governor-General,—received 24th November, 1790. *Original Receipts* 1790, No 328.

## THE MOTHER OF THE COMPANY

THE history of Munni Begam, the wife of Nawab Mir Jafar, is as full of romance as that of her contemporary Begam Samru—the celebrated Princess of Saïdhana. Born and bred in poverty, she rose to the exalted position of the Regent of Bengal and a trusted friend of the great Governor-General Warren Hastings.

Her birth was humble. She was the daughter of a poor widow of Balkunda, a village near Sikandra, who, being unable to bring up the child, sold her to Bisu, a slave-girl belonging to Sammen Ali Khan. Bisu lived for five years at Delhi where she taught Munni the art of dancing. Munni's fame soon spread far and near, and Nawab Shahamat Jang (Nawazish Muhammad Khan), at the marriage of his adopted son Ikram-ud-daula—the younger brother of Siraj-ud-daula (c. Aug. 1746) summoned to Murshidabad Bisu's troupe of dancing-girls, to which Munni belonged, for a fee of Rs. 10,000. After that event, they continued to practise their trade at Murshidabad, which was at that time “as extensive, populous, and rich as the city of London, with this difference, that there were individuals in the first possessing infinitely greater property than any in the last city.”\* Mir Jafar engaged the party on Rs. 500 a month. Munni Bibi's beauty and musical skill soon conquered his heart and he took her into his harem. Babbu, the daughter of Sammen Ali Khan, also found a place in his seraglio afterwards.†

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\* Evidence of Lord Clive before the Committee of the House of Commons, 1772.

† Letter, recd. 5 June 1775, from Nanda Rai (the treasurer of Munni Begam) to Genl. Clavering and other Gentlemen of the Council.—*Secret Consultation*, 24 July 1775, No. 13A.

Munni Begam's attainments, cleverness and sincere love for her master raised her to the position of the principal Begam of Mir Jafar's harem and threw into the shade even his legitimate wife, Shah Khanam.\* This enabled her in later life to gain possession of all the wealth that Mir Jafar had carried away from the Hira Jhil Palace of Nawab Siraj-ud-daula. She had two sons by him, Najm-ud-daula and Saif-ud-daula, while Babbu Begam had one son, Mubarak-ud-daula.

Mir Jafar passed away at Murshidabad on 5th February 1765.† According to Caraccioli, Munni Begam heavily bribed the chiefs of the English Company, in order to secure the succession for her son. The Council at Calcutta disallowed the claim of the minor son of Mir Jafar's only legitimate offspring Miran, and raised Munni Begam's son, Najm-ud-daula, a boy of 15, to the throne. It was during the reign of Najm-ud-daula that the legacy of five lakhs of Rupees, left by Mir Jafar to Clive, was handed over to his Lordship by Munni Begam. She gave the following certificate, dated 12 Jany. 1767, to Clive :

"His Excellency the deceased Nawab when he was alive, of sound mind, and in the full enjoyment of all his mortal faculties gave me repeated orders to the following purport ' Out of the whole money and effects

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\* Shah Khanam, step-sister of Nawab Aliwardi Khan, had a son named Mir Md. Sadiq Ali Khan (Miran) and a daughter who was married to Mir Md. Qasim Khan. Sadiq Ali Khan left two sons, Mir Saidu (Murtaza Kh.) and Mir Supan, and two daughters who were married to Sultan Mirza Daud.—Nanda Rai to Genl. Clavering. *Secret Con.* 24-7-1775, No. 13A; *Calendar of Pers. Correspondence*, iv. No. 1829.

Shah Khanam died—presumably early in 1766—during the Nizamat of Nawab Najm-ud-daula. *Pers. Corr.*, ii. No. 788.

† "... It is with much concern I am now to inform you that Nawab Jafar Ali Khan departed life this day about noon."—Letter from Samuel Middleton, Resident at the Murshidabad Darbar, dated Muxadabad 5th Feby. 1765. *Secret Procdgs.* 5th Feby. 1765, vol. 3, pp. 81-83.

which I have in my possession I have bequethed the sum of three lakhs fifty thousand Rupees in money, fifty thousand Rupees in jewels, and one lakh in gold mohurs, in all five lakhs of Rupees in money and effects, to the Light of my Eyes the Nawab firm in War, Lord Clive the Hero. The remainder after your marriage settlement is paid, you will distribute agreeable to the several proportions I have allotted.' In witness therefore to the truth of this promise of the late Nawab, I have given these few lines as a certificate." (*Public Procdgs.* 20-1-1767, p. 44).

As is well known, Clive formed this amount into a trust fund for the relief and maintenance of invalids in the Company's service and the widows of the soldiers (6 April 1770).

Najm-ud-daula died of fever on 8th May 1766, and was succeeded by his younger brother, who also died a premature death (March 1770). Mubarak-ud-daula, son of Babbu Begam, a boy of 12, was then placed on the throne.

During the reigns of her own sons, Najm-ud-daula and Saif-ud-daula, Munni Begam naturally enjoyed pre-eminence and controlled their household, while Babbu Begam remained in the background. But with the accession of her stepson Mubarak-ud-daula, Munni Begam's authority came to an end. Her lofty spirit and extensive influence had given umbrage to a very powerful man, Muhammad Riza Khan, the Deputy Nawab, who now wanted to instal Babbu Begam in the place of Munni, and succeeded in creating such a tension between the two Begams that they avoided each other's sight (*Mutaqherin*, iii. 26). Babbu claimed the control of her son's household and reported to Cartier, the then Governor of Bengal, the straitened circumstances in which she was living.

Cartier was not aware of it, he having been under the impression that like Munni Begam she too was in

the enjoyment of every comfort.\* He immediately wrote to the Naib Diwan at Murshidabad enquiring about the condition of the Begams. In reply Riza Khan suggested that while the place of honour rightfully belonged to Babbu Begam, it would be better if the two Begams were given equal rank and authority.†

This suggestion, however, did not appeal to the Governor. Such an arrangement, he thought, instead of ending the dispute existing between the two ladies would perpetuate it, and he decided that the real authority should be vested in Babbu Begam, the mother of the Nazim but that, as a matter of form and etiquette, she should treat Munni Begam as her superior.‡ He wrote accordingly (7 June 1770) to Munni Begam to the effect that, now that Mubarak-ud-daula was occupying the *masnad* of the Nizamat, it would be better for her to leave the control of his household to his own mother.§ Muhammad Riza Khan and Mr. Becher (the Resident at Murshidabad) visited Babbu Begam in the fort and, in pursuance of the Governor's orders, vested her with the supreme control of the Nawab's household (June 1770.)§

Riza Khan thus succeeded in setting up Babbu Begam in authority, and Munni Begam—writes her contemporary Ghulam Husain—"whose extent of understanding nothing can be compared to, but the immense stock which she is known to be possessed of in jewels

\* Governor of Bengal to Babbu Begam, dated 26 May 1770. *Pers. Corr.*, iii, Letter No. 231.

† Md. Riza Khan to Governor, dated 22 May 1770. *Pers. Corr.*, iii, Letter No. 224.

‡ Governor to Md. Riza Khan, dated 24 May 1770. *Pers. Corr.*, iii, Letter No. 226.

§ Governor to Munni Begam, dated 7 June 1770. *Pers. Corr.*, iii, Letter No. 245.

§ *Pers. Corr.*, iii, Letters Nos. 256, 264, 276-77.



and money, thought proper to take no notice of such an alteration; and although deeply wounded by such under-hand dealings, she thought it beneath her dignity to descend to an explanation; and she passed the whole over with a disdainful silence." (*Mutaqherin*, iii. 26-27). But Babbu Begam's authority was of very short duration.

Muhammad Riza Khan had been Governor of Dacca and a friend of Lord Clive. During the minority of Nawab Najm-ud-daula he was appointed Naib Nazim, or deputy ruler, with the title of *Muzaffar Jang*, and this office, combined with that of Naib Diwan, he continued to hold under Saif-ud-daula and Mubarak-ud-daula, being virtually the Governor of Bengal.

The administration of Riza Khan, however, was considered inefficient. The ryots groaned under extortion and oppression; cultivation fell away; Bengal suffered unheard of depopulation (the loss of one-third of its total population) from the famine and pestilence of 1769-70, unprecedented in our history in their intensity, and the unhappy country was ravaged by bands of lawless banditti known as the Sannyasis. This was the darkest period in Bengal's lot, when the Company's servants enjoyed power without responsibility, and the natives had no protection from any foreign oppressor. The Directors in England grew alarmed at the situation and appointed Warren Hastings as Governor of Bengal to remedy the evil. He took charge of the government from Cartier in April 1772, when the times were out of joint. On his arrival in Calcutta he carried out the orders of the Home authorities by arresting Riza Khan on a charge of fraud and embezzlement and brought him down to Calcutta for trial.

Riza Khan having been removed from the post of the administrator of Bengal, the Company decided "to stand forth as Diwan, and, by the agency of their own

servants, to take upon themselves the entire care and management of the revenues." To settle the land revenue of the various districts on the spot, a Committee of Circuit was formed with Hastings as President. During the stay of the Committee at Kasimbazar, Hastings paid visits to the Nawab's palace. Munni Begam, then aged about 50, was proposed for the superintendency of the Nawab's household, and the guardianship of his person on an annual allowance of Rs. 1,40,000,\* assisted by Rajah Gurudas, the son of Nanda Kumar, in the capacity of her diwan. The Committee of Circuit justified the appointment of the Begam by the following piece of reasoning :—

"We know no person so fit for the trust of *Guardian to the Nawab as the widow of the late Nawab Jafar, Ali Khan, Munni Begam*. Her rank may give her a claim to this pre-eminence without hazard to

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\* Munni Begam was drawing a monthly allowance of Rs. 6,000, which had been settled upon her by Nawab Najm-ud-daula, but as it was considered inadequate for maintaining her new and exalted position, she petitioned Hastings in August 1772 for an increase. (*Procdgs. of the Committee of Circuit at Krishnagar & Kasimbazar*, pp. 210-11).

The Committee of Circuit decided the question of her allowance thus :—

"With respect to the allowance of the Begam and the diwan, we thought we could not be guided by a better rule than that which our Honourable Masters have been pleased to prescribe on the subject of the ostensible minister which they mention, for the Nawab's affairs. As in fact the Begam, the diwan and the Rai-ryan of the Khalsa stand in the room of this minister, we thought the sum of three lakhs allowed for him, would be properly divided among the three, and we have settled it in the following proportions—

	Rs.
To Munni Begam .. .. .	1,40,000
To Rajah Gurudas diwan, for himself and officers ..	1,00,000
To Rajah Rajballabh, Rai-ryan of the Khalsa ..	60,000
	3,00,000

— Letter of Committee of Circuit, dated Kasimbazar 14 September 1772. *Secret Procdgs.* 21 September 1772, No. 3.

our own policy, nor will it be found incompatible with the rules prescribed to her sex by the laws and manners of the country, as her authority will be confined to the walls of the Nawab's palace and the Diwan will act of course in all cases in which she cannot personally appear. Great abilities are not to be expected in a zenana, but in these she is very far from being deficient, nor is any extraordinary reach of understanding requisite for so limited an employ. She is said to have acquired a great ascendant over the spirit of the Nawab being the only person of whom he stands in any kind of awe; a circumstance highly necessary for fulfilling the chief part of her duty in directing his education and conduct, which appear to have been hitherto much neglected.\* (Minute, 11th July, 1772).

But the supersession of the Nawab's own mother by Munni Begam was an unnatural arrangement and Hastings had to take pains to justify the step. He wrote to the Hon'ble Josias Dupre on 8th October, 1772 :—

“The execution of these measures was a matter of much delicacy, because the Nawab's servants were in possession, and his mother was considered as the head of the family. However, by avoiding every appearance of violence, and by a proper address to the Nawab's counsellors, he was easily induced, with a very good grace, and without opposition, to give his assent to the appointments, which were conferred in form in the presence of the Committee.† I should have mentioned that it had been previously resolved in the Nawab's council, that he should solemnly protest against them, claim the administration of his own affairs, or declare his resolution to abdicate the government and retire to Calcutta; he did neither. I had the honour some time afterwards to reconcile the two ladies, and to bring about a meeting between them; an event from which I claim some merit, although I do not imagine there is a grain of affection subsisting between them.” (Gleig, i. 261-2).

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\* *Secret Procdgs.* 6 August 1772, vol. 22, p. 69.

† *Secret Procdgs.* 29 August 1772, No. 1.

Scandalous tongues suggested that Munni Begam's money had converted Hastings into her supporter. But, in truth, he was actuated by a deeper motive, as his letters show.\* For seven years Riza Khan had had the absolute command of every branch of the Nizam's and been, in all but the name, the Nazim of the province; his influence in the Nawab's household and at the capital was scarcely affected by his present disgrace, and it is chiefly with the object of "eradicating his influence" that the choice fell on Munni Begam and Raja Gurudas—both of them declared enemies of Riza Khan. This also was the reason why Babbu Begam, the Nawab's own mother, was set aside; she was at heart a partizan of Riza Khan.

To explain the grounds which had prompted him to offer the guardianship of the Nawab to Munni Begam, Hastings wrote to the Home authorities (on 1st September 1772) :—

"The appointment of Munni Begam, I believe, will require no apology. It was unanimously approved, and if I can be a judge of the public opinion, it is a measure of general satisfaction.

The only man who could pretend to such a trust was the Nawab Ihtisam-ud-daula, the brother of Mir Jafar, a man, indeed, of no dangerous abilities, nor apparent ambition, but the father of a numerous family, who by his being brought so nigh to the masnad would have acquired a right of inheritance to the subahship; and if only one of his sons, who are all in the prime of life, should have raised his hopes to the succession, it would have been in his power at any time to remove the single obstacle which the Nawab's life opposed to the advancement of his family. The guardian at least

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\* Hastings to the Hon'ble Josias Dupre, '8 October 1772; Hastings to the Secret Committee of the Hon'ble Court of Directors dated 1st September 1772.—See Gleig's *Memoirs of Warren Hastings*, i. 250, 261-2.

would have been the Nazim while the minority lasted, and all the advantages which the Company may hope to derive from it in the confirmation of their power would have been lost, or could only have been maintained by a contention hurtful to their rights, or by a violence yet more exceptionable. The case would be much the same were any other man placed in that station.....

The Begam, as a woman, is incapable of passing the bounds assigned her; her ambition cannot aspire to higher dignity. She has no children to provide for, or mislead her fidelity; her actual authority rests on the Nawab's life, and therefore cannot endanger it. It must cease with his minority, when she must depend absolutely on the Company for support against her ward and pupil, who will then become her master. Of course her interest must lead her to concur with all the designs of the Company, and to solicit their patronage. I have the pleasure to add that, in the exercise of her office, she has already shown herself amply qualified for it, by her discernment, economy, and a patient attention to affairs.”\*

Warren Hastings was appointed Governor-General on 20th October 1774, and a new council was appointed consisting of four councillors, three of whom—viz., Mr. Francis, Genl. Clavering and Col. Mouson—arrived from England in the same month. On their arrival, strong dissensions broke out in the council, and the disagreement between the triumvirate and Hastings's party, consisting of himself and Richard Barwell, soon reached such a pitch as to become a public scandal. This gave the enemies of the Governor-General a splendid opportunity to satisfy the ancient grudge they bore towards him. Maharajah Nanda Kumar addressed the Supreme Council quoting instances of infamous action and corruption on the part of Hastings. One of the

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\* Hastings to the Secret Committee of the Court of Directors, dated Kasimbazar, 1st September, 1772.—Gleig, i. 253-54.

charges trumped up against the Governor-General was his acceptance of a bribe of a lakh and a half from Munni Begam at the time of her appointment as Guardian to the Nawab. But the Begam maintained that the amount in question "was sent on account of entertainment. The custom of entertainment was of long standing, and that every Governor, who had visited Murshidabad before, received a daily sum of Rs. 2,000 as such, which was in fact [given] instead of provisions."\*

But the trio, who formed the majority, were not satisfied with the management of Munni Begam, and in May 1775 they removed her from her office. Rajah Gurudas was invested with authority to deal with all affairs of the Nizamats.† In justification of her dismissal, the three councillors in their minutes to the Court of Directors, dated 15th September 1775, remarked :—

"...She is not the Nawab's mother. She is not by birth a woman of any rank, but originally as we are informed, a slave and a dancing girl. We consider her merely as an instrument in the Governor's hand to dispose of the Nawab's revenue as he might think proper. His committing the guardianship of the Nawab to a weak woman, as he [Hastings] calls her in another place, is not to be accounted for on any other principle...

The present distresses of the Nawab and his family, the clamorous of his creditors, and the mean and dishonourable state in which he was kept, sufficiently show what care she took of his revenues, and in what manner they were disposed of. Her care of his education stands much upon the same footing. While she was destroying his fortune, it is not likely that she should attend to the cultivation of his mind, nor do we conceive it possible

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\* Letter, recd. 14 June 1775, from Munni Begam to the Governor-General. *Secret Procdgs.* 24-7-1775, col. 14, pp. 563-66.

† *Pers. Correspondence*, iv. Letters Nos. 1752, 1780, 1802, 1806.

she could be qualified for such a trust. The accounts brought down by Mr. James Grant are under examination. The over-payment of near fourteen lakhs on account of the Nawab's pension in the year 1772 is admitted by Mr. Hastings as a *material error*. The Nawab's *present* debts are *supposed* to amount to nine lakhs, contracted during the guardianship of the Begam."<sup>\*</sup>

Great was the disappointment of Hastings at her dismissal. He wrote to Mr. Laurence Sullivan (afterwards Chairman of the E. I. Co.) on 21st March 1776 :—

"They have dismissed the Begam from her office which I had assigned her for the express and sole purpose of guarding the Company's authority against encroachment or competition."

Munni Begam continued throughout life a faithful friend of Hastings in all his troubles. Her sincere attachment to Mrs. Hastings is evident from the following letter which Hastings wrote to his wife on 28th February, 1784 :—

"I forgot to tell you that Munni Begam expressed her regret of your departure in terms which seemed too natural to have proceeded from mere civility, and I was pleased to hear her say that she grieved on my account as much as for her own loss in your departure and the necessity which occasioned it."<sup>†</sup>

<sup>\*</sup> *Selections from State Papers preserved in the Foreign Dept., 1772-1785*, ii. 478.

<sup>†</sup> S. C. Grier : *Letters of Warren Hastings to his Wife*, p. 267.

In the Victoria Memorial Museum are exhibited "an ivory chair and a small table of the same material which formed part of a historic set of furniture. They were a present from Munni Begam to Mrs. Hastings, and for many years they were at Daylesford, the English home of Hastings." H. E. A. Cotton : *Calcutta Old & New*, p. 825; Munni Begam's presents to Mr. and Mrs. Hastings, Grier, pp. 244, 341, 365.

Munni Begam had good reason to be grateful to Hastings. His care for her interests continued to the last; and on the eve of sailing away from India he wrote, on 3rd November 1783, a sentimental letter to the Court of Directors in her praise, desiring them to make a large allowance for her comfort in her old age. This letter, with an *arzi* from the Begam, was transmitted by Hastings to the Court without communicating it to the Council :—

“She too became the victim of your policy, and of the resentments which succeeded. Something too she owed of the source of her misfortunes to the belief of the personal gratitude which she might entertain for the public attention which I had shown to her; yet exposed as she was to a treatment which a ruffian would have shuddered at committing, and which no recollection of past enmities shall impell me to believe, even for a moment, proceeded from any commission of authority, she still maintained the decorum of her character : nor even then, nor before, nor since that period, has the malice of calumny dared to breathe on her reputation.

Pardon, honourable sirs, this freedom of expostulation. I must in honest truth repeat, that your commands laid the first foundation of her misfortunes. To your equity she has now recourse through me for their alleviation, that she may pass the remainder of her life in a state which may at least efface the remembrance of the years of her affliction and to your humanity she and an unseen multitude of the most helpless of her sex cry for subsistence.”\*

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\* Burke's comments on this letter are significant :—

“It appears upon your printed minutes, that this woman had a way of comforting herself. . . This lady was a smuggler, and had influence enough to avoid payment of the duty on spirits, in which article she was the largest dealer in the district; as indeed she was in almost every species of trade. . . She carried on, notwithstanding her dignity, a trade in spirits. . . But she appears not only to have been a dealer in it, but, through the influence which Mr. Hastings gave her, to have monopolized the trade in brandy, and to have evaded the duties. . .” *Impeachment of Warren Hastings*, p. 494.



The Court of Directors forwarded a copy of Hastings's letter and that of the enclosed *arzi* of the Begam, to the Governor-General and Council with the following instructions :—

“ An application has been made to us by Mr. Hastings in behalf of Munni Begam, the widow of the late Mir Jafar, a copy of whose letters we likewise enclose. It is our wish to alleviate, as far as the circumstances of our affairs will permit us, the distress of all the relations of Mir Jafar, and enable the present Nawab and his family, under an economical system to be adjusted by you, to live comfortably and happy. But as the real situation of Munni Begam will of course be included in your enquiries, and in the report upon the general subject of the Nawab's family and expenses, we shall forbear for the present to make any further observations thereon than to direct that an independent stipend be allotted for her support, subject, as in the other case, to our future consideration and approval.”\*

Mubarak-ud-daula nominally obtained his emancipation on the removal of Munni Begam from the regency. But she still contrived to maintain absolute control over the entire Nawab family, for she had vast wealth at her command, and was full of resources. As Mubarak-ud-daula cherished the hope of one day inheriting her hoard of jewels and cash, she could easily frighten him into compliance with her wishes by threatening to “squander her riches amongst the poor or to leave them to strangers and Frenghees (Europeans).” Indeed, she appears to have been feared, though not loved. She was allowed to retain the dignity of a Princess, being assigned a monthly allowance of Rs. 12,000, and continued to live at Murshidabad in splendour.

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\* *Public Letter from the Court of Directors*, dated London 21st July, 1786, para. 25.

After the death of Mubarak-ud-daula, on 6th September 1793, his son Babar Ali Khan or Mubarak-ud-daula the Second succeeded him. During his Nizamat Lord Valentia visited Murshidabad (1804) and had an interview with both the Nawab and Munni Begam. The following account of the Begam from his pen is likely to be of interest to the reader :—

“ She lives in a small garden of about an acre and a half, which, out of respect to Mir Jafar’s memory, she has not quitted since his death, which is now forty years. She conversed from behind a scarlet silk purdah, that was stretched across a handsome open room, supported by pillars. The whole had an appearance of opulence... Her voice is loud and coarse, but occasionally tremulous... \* She has a good understanding, though her temper is exceedingly violent. There is no doubt of her being rich; but what will become of her property is uncertain. Nothing can induce her to make a will : the very mention of a thing that insinuates a supposition of its being possible she can die, throwing her into a violent passion... During the whole of our stay two *minahs* were talking most incessantly, to the great delight of the old lady, who often laughed at what they said, and praised their talents. Her hookah filled up the intervals.” (*Voyages & Travels*, i. 184-85).

Babar Ali Khan died on 28th April 1810. His death was followed by a dispute over the succession. Munni Begam pressed the claim of Sayyid Abul Qasim (popularly called Mungli Sahib), the second son of Mubarak-ud-daula I, and brother of Babar Ali, and endeavoured to secure the *masnad* for him,† but the

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\* Lord Valentia was informed by Mrs. Pattle (wife of the Superintendent of Nizamat Affairs) who had seen the Begam in old age, that she was very short and fat, with vulgar, large, harsh features, and altogether one of the ugliest women she ever beheld. This was probably due to the ravages of old age.

† Letter, recd. 17 May 1810, from Munni Begam *Political Correspondence of Lord Minto*, 1810 (Receipt Vol.), No. 261.

Governor-General, Lord Minto, favoured Ali Jah, the eldest son of Babar Ali, who was installed on 5th June, 1810.

Munni Begam was the first of the few ruling ladies—known as Gaddinashin Begams—to whom separate *deorhis* or allowances were assigned. Both she and Babbu Begam belonged to this class.\*

The beautiful Chowk Masjid, south-east of the Murshidabad Palace—the largest mosque in the city—stands as a monument to her fame. It was built by her in 1767 on the site of Nawab Shuja Khan's *Chehel Setun*, the forty-pillared audience hall.

She was styled 'the Mother of the Company.' When she was overwhelmed with grief and sorrow at the death of her husband, Lord Clive came to her and said,—“*It is true I cannot restore the late Nawab to life; but I declare with the utmost sincerity of heart that I consider myself and all the English Gentlemen to be your Highness's children and that we regard you as our mother. We shall conform to your pleasure, and never act contrary to your will.*”† She was indeed high in the favour of Clive and Hastings. It is said that her lavish presents gained for her the title of 'Mother-o-the Company.' “She in her turn received several, one of which was from Rani Bhawani, being a *palki* with 30 bearers gifted with service tenures, which they were to enjoy in lieu of wages. The lands so given are still in the possession of the Nizamat.” (*Masnad of Murshidabad*, p. 132).

Munni Begam was a benevolent lady. Once a maid-servant in her employ was in great distress, being

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\* Babbu Begam's allowance was fixed at Rs. 8,000 per month. She died on 18th November 1809.

† Letter recd. 17 May 1810 from Munni Begam.—*Pol. Corr.* of Lord Minto, 1810 (Receipt Vol.), No. 261.

unable to give her daughter in marriage for want of funds. On hearing of it, the Begam immediately sent her 70 or 80 gold mohurs and other necessary things. Nor was this the only instance of her generosity (*Mutaqherin*, iii. 147-48).

A woman of much sense and spirit, she was haughty and overbearing in character, but steadfast, and faithful, never forsaking a friend or a dependent. Although not of a virtuous family, nor of noble birth, she was a woman of unusual capacity, and her good sense, as well as her steadiness of purpose, was never so remarkable, as when she had any scheme to carry into execution. For, whatever she once undertook, she never failed to perform, as she always found some expedient or other for attaining success. But she failed as a ruler. Had she brought herself to the practice of sitting behind a curtain and hearing complaints herself, instead of leaving all things entirely to her deputy Ilbar Ali—a mean-minded, savage and imbecile fellow, who gave a good deal of trouble and uneasiness to many—the government of Murshidabad would never have been snatched out of her hands. (*Mutaqherin*, iii. 41-42, 147).

Munni Begam retained the full vigour of her intellect even in old age. After the death of her husband she had the management and control of the Nizammat and the settlement of all points connected with its administration, and thus exercised authority for about half a century. Her long life was full of vicissitudes. She had seen her husband raised to the *masnad* of Murshidabad by the British, deposed and raised again, and her royal son reduced to a pensioner. But the chequered career of the erstwhile dancing-girl of Sikandra at last drew to a close. She died on 10th January, 1813, leaving personal property worth over 15 lakhs. Her mortal remains lie buried within an enclosure of wavy walls at Jafaraganj, the family ceme-

tery of Mir Jafar, about a mile and a half from the Palace.\*

Her death and the proceedings that followed it are graphically described by Mr. T. Brooke, the Superintendent of Nizamat Affairs, in his letter to the Persian Secretary to Government :—

“ . From undoubted sources of information the death of Her Highness was sudden; she had sat up the preceding night in the performance of the celebration of the Muharram to a late hour; when she got up in the morning she did not complain of fatigue, had been giving her orders as usual, retired between ten and eleven for occasions, where she dropped down; is said to have called out for His Highness, but expired before he could reach her without uttering another word... Everybody seemed engaged in preparations for the interment of Her Highness which had been fixed for five in the evening, but the procession did not move from the Palace till the hour of six. The Nawab, in all his state followed the body, the Superintendent accompanied His Highness; first to the masjid, and afterwards to the family burying ground at Jafaraganj, where the remains of Her Highness were deposited at a little before 9 o'clock at night.

The age of Her Highness may be computed to have been ninety-seven from the information of persons in the family now living who in former times have frequently heard the Begam declare she was twenty-three years of age at the massacre of Delhi by Nadir Shah, which occurred in 1739.

It was my anxious desire that the funeral obsequies of this venerable lady should have been marked by every distinction which could demonstrate the respect of the British Government, but Her Highness's sudden demise precluded any preparatory steps to fulfil the orders of

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\* Shortly after her death, a sum of Rs. 9,500, out of the private property left by her, was invested in Government Securities, as a fund to defray the expenses of an establishment at her tomb. See Reports on the Accounts of the Murshidabad Nizamat Stipend Fund, from 1816-17 to 1859, etc.

Government; and when it was proposed that the interment should be postponed until the Military Detachment could arrive from Berhampur and the Gentlemen of the station could be assembled at the Palace, it seemed to give so much dissatisfaction and was so warmly opposed that the suggestion was abandoned. But Her Highness's remains were carried to the grave with every mark of native pomp and splendour, the whole of His Highness's establishment attended, and the procession was accompanied by crowds of people..." (Dated 11th January, 1813).\*

As a mark of respect to her memory, minute guns to the number of ninety, corresponding to the years of her life, were fired by order of the Governor-General, from the ramparts of Fort William on the evening of 14th January 1813, the flag being hoisted half mast.†

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\* *Secret Consultation*, 26 February, 1813, No. 18.

† Sandeman : *Selections from Calcutta Gazettes of the years 1806-16*, iv, 120-21.

## APPENDIX

### PERSONAL PROPERTY OF MUNNI BEGAM

*Extract from a letter, dated Murshidabad 26 Dec. 1816, from J. Monckton to John Adam, Actg. Secretary to Government, Fort William.*

4. The jewels may fairly be estimated at not less than six lakhs of Rupees, the gold and silver utensils amount in weight to Sicca Rupees one lakh, two thousand and fifteen, and the property in goods consisting of rich velvets, Benares, gold and silver stuffs, shawls, muslins, silks, beautifully embroidered purdahs, and a countless variety of other articles cannot be estimated at less than one lakh and a half of Rupees. . . .

5. The treasure in gold, silver, and copper coin amounted to 150,507-12 Rupees, but in taking an account of the money, a box containing 16,053 Rupees was pointed out to me as belonging to Zeb-un-nisa Begam, who is granddaughter of His Highness Nawab Mir Jafar Ali Khan, and also to her brother.

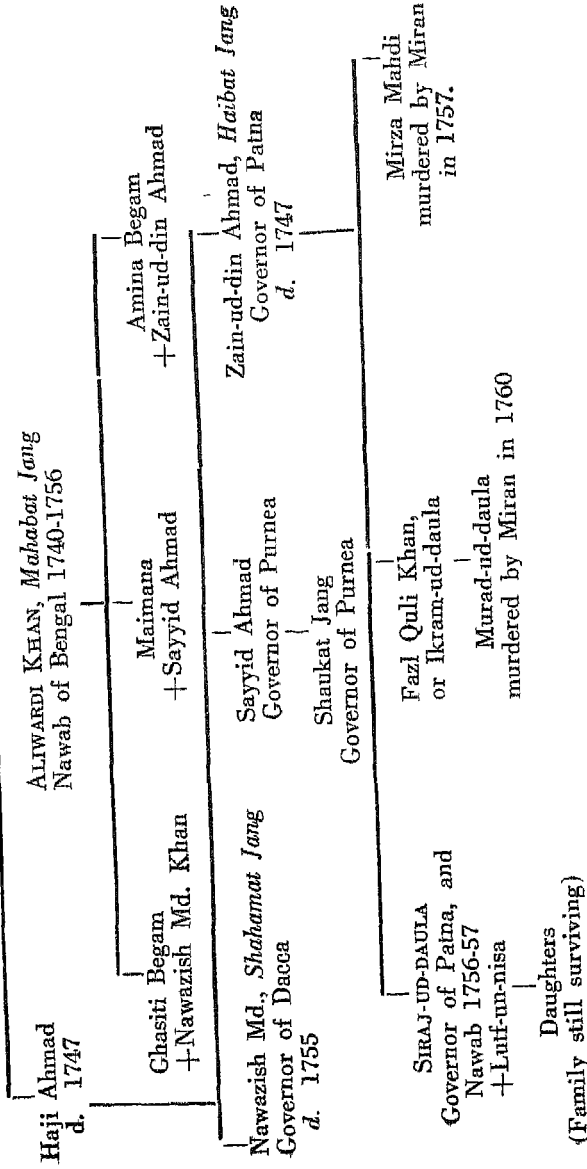
15. The sum of 16,053 Rupees being deducted from the property found in the late Munni Begam's apartments. the treasure which actually belonged to Her Highness amounted to Rupees 14,85,454-12, out of which has been deducted Rupees 8,58,043-14-8, and a further sum of Rs. 44,650, reserved for the purpose of reducing jewels mortgaged on bond, to the amount of Rs. 50,000, leaving a surplus of Rs. 5,82,760-13-4, which has been formerly made over to His Highness, together with the whole of the jewels, gold and silver utensils, and other property amounting collectively to about 8,50,000 Rupees. Thus, by the death of Her Highness the Munni Begam, the Nawab has acquired personal property to the extent of nearly fifteen lakhs of Rupees, besides the possession of lands and houses, and the Chowk adjoining the Palace, which alone yields a revenue of 12,000 Rupees per mensem.\*

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\**Indian Records, with a commercial view of the relations between the British Government and the Nawabs Nazim of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, pp. 63-66.*

# FAMILY OF NAWAB ALIWARDI

MIRZA MUHAMMAD





# FAMILY OF NAWAB MIR JAFAR

MIR JAFAR

d. 5 Feb. 1765

+

Munni Begam

d. 10 Jan. 1813

Shah Khanam  
(Aliwardi Khan's step-sister)

Sadiq Ali Khan  
(Miran)

daughter  
+ Mir Qasim  
a. 1760

Mir Saidu  
(Murtaza Kh.)

Mir Supan

Najm-ud-daula  
a. March 1765  
d. May 1766

Saif-ud-daula  
a. May 1766  
d. 6 March 1770

Babbu Begam

Mubarak-ud-daula  
a. 20 March 1770  
d. 6 Sept. 1793

Babar Ali Khan  
(Mubarak-ud-daula II.)  
a. 24 Sep. 1793  
d. 28 Apr. 1810

Ali Jah

a. 5 June 1810

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